European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy

V-2 | 2013
Pragmatism and the Social Dimension of Doubt

Interfamilial Issues

Stéphane Madelrieux

OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/549
DOI: 10.4000/ejpap.549
ISSN: 2036-4091

Publisher
Associazione Pragma

Electronic reference
Stéphane Madelrieux, « Interfamilial Issues », *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], V-2 | 2013, Online since 24 December 2013, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/549 ; DOI : 10.4000/ejpap.549

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

Interfamilial Issues

Stéphane Madelrieux

1 Chery Misak's book on the history of American pragmatism[1] is both descriptive and normative. She tells the story of the continuous presence of the pragmatist inspiration in America through five generations of eminent philosophers from Chauncey Wright to Hilary Putnam born 100 years after him, showing that pragmatism has never been eclipsed from the philosophical scene even during the heyday of logical empiricism. At the same time, she divides American pragmatists between a good trend going from Charles Sanders Peirce to Clarence Irving Lewis and Wilfrid Sellars and a bad trend going from William James and John Dewey to Richard Rorty. The good guys take the whole aim of an inquiry to be to get things objectively right, while the bad guys are irremediably subjectivist and relativist, "tossing us in a sea of arbitrariness, where there is no truth or where truth varies from person to person or culture from culture" (2013: 4). Needless to say that the author, originally a Peirce scholar, wants to save the reputation of pragmatism by cutting off the rotten branch of the tree, a necessary separation that could provide with the opportunity to further the association between pragmatism and analytic philosophy. The advantage of a normative standpoint when analyzing a story is to highlight some parts of it that have been hitherto neglected – this is the case with the real philosophical affinities between pragmatists and logical empiricists beyond the mere strategy of alliance in the universities when the latter came to the United States in the 1930s. Cheryl Misak makes her point strongly and convincingly. But the inconvenient of such a selective reading is to cast into shadow so many parts of the story that some questions of method inevitably arise.

2 1. As Cheryl Misak's book consists finally in a classification, the first question to ask is about the criteria she uses to class such or such an author in one of the two trends. She has taken what she considers the central theme of pragmatism, namely its theory of truth, thus dividing the pragmatists between the objectivists and the subjectivists in matter of truth. While it is indisputable that critics of pragmatism have focused on truth, this does not entail that truth is the best thread to understand the development of pragmatism. It is certainly not the only one. Does Cheryl Misak believe that to be a pragmatist should imply to be a pluralist in our classification of pragmatists? It has been

claimed for instance that the main divide between pragmatists is between those who insist on the primacy of experience and those who consider that empiricism was the childhood disease of pragmatism, to be cured by taking the linguistic turn. In this classification, Peirce and James would stand together against Sellars and Rorty. Even if we take the theory of truth to be the right criteria, we could divide them between those who just want to clarify the correspondence theory, which is nominally good, by a kind of verificationism (James and Peirce again) and those who, dropping all consideration of experience, provide us with a version or another of the coherence theory (such as Rorty's notion of consensus), the distinction between a more objective and a more subjective pole being secondary and subordinated to this major one which crosses all the history of philosophy. We could also distinguish between those who think that we have to address the epistemological problems for their own sake and those who think that what matters in definitive for a pragmatist is the reform of our values. In short, Cheryl Misak has to justify her choice against other competing and equally legitimate choices, taking them seriously and comparing the practical consequences of each classification: what do we lose in our understanding of pragmatism when we take the theory of truth as the essential criteria against which to understand and discuss each and every pragmatist of the last 150 years? In the following sections, I will state what constitutes to my mind some drawbacks of her choice, both from a normative as well as from a descriptive point of view.

3 2. If we adopt a pragmatist conception of classification, we have to admit that every classification is teleological. Cheryl Mysak's purpose is in this view clear: to put pragmatism back in the "mainstream" (last word of the book). Her interest is to make pragmatism and analytic philosophy converge, which she does in two ways: by recounting the story of the absence of a break between pragmatists and logical empiricists and by relying on an ambiguous definition of what is analytic philosophy. She seems to accept a minimal conception of what analytic philosophy is, characterized only by a way of doing philosophy, a method consisting in using argumentative rigor to justify our assertions. However, as she explains all along the book through recurrent analyses of Peirce's indispensability argument, the very practice of asserting and arguing presupposes that we aim to get things right so that aiming to the truth is a regulative assumption of our very practice of doing philosophy in an analytic way. In short, analytic philosophy as a mere style of philosophy presupposes the very pragmatist (and very substantial) theory of truth that she intends to promote. But I am not sure that this purpose, as legitimate as it can be, will do any good for the future of pragmatism. First, because it tends to present pragmatism's history as the divide between a kind of (good) analytic pragmatism (of which Peirce is the main forerunner) and a kind of (bad) continental pragmatism (of which Rorty is the main outcome). The divide within pragmatism would then be but the repercussion of the great divide between analytic and continental philosophy: pragmatism would only be the American way of dealing with this great divide. The conclusion is that pragmatism has brought nothing essential to philosophy, so that nothing essential would have been lost if America had not entered the philosophical scene. We would have had good analytic philosophy in Austria and England and bad continental philosophy in transcendental Germany and postmodernist France. Otto Neurath's boat, floating on the open sea, would not have needed to come to the shores of America to discover anti-foundationalism with objectivity. Second, this version of pragmatism will have the practical consequence of discouraging the attempt to render pragmatism a third way between analytic and continental philosophy. It was Rorty's

project to show that pragmatism can overcome the shortcomings of both analytic and continental philosophies while taking the best of the two traditions, and even if we disagree with the way Rorty implemented this program, this seems a more promising way of seeing pragmatism than to bring it back to the "mainstream." Besides, was this not already the case with the historical pragmatists? Shouldn't we see Peirce as overcoming both Hegel's metaphysics and Mill's logic? James as distancing himself from both Bergson's antinaturalist spiritualism and Russell's atomistic empiricism? Dewey as leaving behind both Heidegger and Carnap? And Rorty as trying to write after both Quine and Derrida, correcting the one with the other? In another book, Cheryl Misak wrote that there are indeed "significant differences between pragmatism and logical empiricism (pragmatism was friendly to ethics, to context, and to the history of philosophy for instance)" (Misak, 2010: 217). Well, ethics, context and history of philosophy have certainly been at the forefront of continental philosophy and we can be glad that pragmatism managed to keep them going. Isn't Misak's book the perfect illustration that an historical narration can be allied with a logical argumentation to promote philosophical theses?

4 3. But the worst consequences of Cheryl Misak's normative position are certainly found on the descriptive level. As paradoxical as it may seem, she is still too much under the influence of Rorty. She has so much conceived her book in opposition to Rorty's version of pragmatism that he is everywhere, as she takes for granted the genealogy he has himself given to his own pragmatism (James and Dewey rather than Peirce). She is fatally led not only to simplifications ("the James/Rorty position," "the jamesian branch of pragmatism," 2013: 231, 254) but also to errors of interpretation. She is yet at her best when she tries to right some wrongs committed against the good guys. Her best chapter shows how Lewis is not guilty of the myth of the given, and she takes pains to read very closely the texts to debunk what she sees as unfair criticisms. On the very topic of the theory of truth, she also succeeds in absolving Peirce from conceiving truth as an ideal limit, which had become the traditional way of presenting his views. But when it comes to James, Schiller or Dewey, the fair and careful reading seems forgotten. No defense against the way they have been caricatured; on the contrary, she endorses the main bulk of the criticisms from the part of the anti-pragmatists: they pave the way to radical subjectivism. She does not seem eager to show how Schillers's distinction between the propositions which claim to be true, but are not, and the claims to truth which are valid, undermines all charge of relativism – especially as the sorting between valid and invalid truth-claims are made according to Schiller by the trial of experience and not by any *a priori* inspection of the propositions (Schiller makes of this distinction the very definition of his pragmatism, and on this point he is effectively concordant with what Peirce, James and Dewey thought).

5 I have to insist a bit on James, as he is taken by Cheryl Misak as the classical pragmatism's equivalent of Rorty, Rorty being the "contemporary pragmatism's William James" (2013: 225). Like Russell did, Misak's too links closely James's pragmatism with the will-to-believe doctrine, which amounts to saying, according to her, that "I am free to believe whatever appeals to me" (2013: 160), so that "we can simply choose the beliefs we should accept" (2013: 147), even beliefs "unbacked by reasons" (2013: 148), without waiting for any evidence that would support them, provided these beliefs give us satisfaction, which is evidence enough. From this way of justifying religious faith (religion makes me happy, so I choose to believe that there is a God), James would have smoothly moved to a

subjectivist theory of truth that claims that the truth of a belief is relative to the individual who adopts it so that truth is variable from person to person (is true whatever belief that satisfies a given individual in its subjectivity). Let us not forget that between the will-to-believe doctrine and the pragmatist theory of truth, James wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience* where he seems to take mystical experiences for evidence that God exists, even if they are convincing only for the mystic. Well, I would like to repeat what James said in answer to the very same criticisms: "It is difficult to excuse such a parody of the pragmatist's opinion" (James, 1975b: 104). Cheryl Misak quotes rightly the thesis of the will to believe: "our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds" (James, 1979: 20). According to this thesis, the will to believe has no necessary relation with the defense of religious faith as it is only a very general method to solve philosophical dilemmas. This method is not specifically religious in itself and is conceived to be applied to every kind of topics where such dilemmas occur, such as the traditional antinomies between freedom and determinism. The will to believe, like pragmatism in its first intention, is thus a method and only a method that stands for no particular results. The philosophical problems such a method is supposed to solve are dilemmas of a very specific kind. The first condition for a dilemma to be liable to be solved by the will-to-believe method is to be "genuine": the theoretical difference between the alternative must make a practical difference in the conduct of those who choose one option rather than the other in the dilemma. The second condition is that the dilemma cannot by its very nature be decided "on intellectual grounds" – that is by justifying one option or the other by way of empirical proofs and/or logical reasoning. All debates such as scientific controversies that are or could be solved by waiting for the proper observation or deduction are thus not candidates for such a test. We are not entitled by the will-to-believe method to believe "ahead of the evidence" (2013: 62) as there is no evidence to be expected by the very nature of the dilemma. Note also that no existing theology passes the second test, as they all contain propositions that can be refuted "on intellectual ground." The only legitimate problems are thus moral and metaphysical dilemmas – moral dilemmas as they are not about facts but about the value of some facts ("moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the *worths*, both of what exists and of what does not exists, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart," James, 1979: 27 – typically: "is life *worth* living?"); metaphysical dilemmas in so far as they are not about some fact in the world but about the whole of facts ("When the objects are concrete, particular, and familiar, our reactions are firm and certain enough [...] and then the object confronts us, that knocks our mental door and ask to be let in, and fixed and decided and actively met, is just this whole universe itself and its essence. What are they and how shall I meet them?" (James, 1979: 98) – typically: is the *whole* universe, my actions included, determined from the beginning?) Contrary to Wittgenstein who thinks that such "problems of life" cannot be argued, James tried to device a method to discuss and justify the choice of one option against the other – a specific method for ethics and metaphysics but equivalent to the experimental method designed to tackle the problems soluble "on intellectual grounds" only: comparing the practical consequences in our life that would follow from the choice of one option rather than the other in the dilemma (try it and we will see). Trying to find a method of inquiry apt to cope with questions of value is a hallmark of all genuine pragmatists, as Cheryl Misak rightly notices. The clearest case of application of this

method in James' work does not concern the dilemma between theism and atheism, but rather the one between determinism and indeterminism – which was certainly one of the most, if not the most, important problem for him from a metaphysical and moral point of view. James' personal choice to "keep the faith in freedom" as he said shows us that the very concept of faith has nothing to do with religious matters, but rather denotes a general attitude of refusing to lose hope for the future (which is all the belief in indeterminism means – or, for that matter, the belief in God).[2] Like many others, Peirce mistook what James says in this essay. We are so used to think that James is the one who has not understood Peirce that we take for granted that Peirce has always understood James...

6 As for pragmatism, when James uses terms such as "individual" or "particular," it is never to suggest that truth could vary for you and for me, but rather to indicate that the truth-relation between a belief and that which it is about has to be describable in a specific and concrete way. Take the application of the pragmatic method: "the universe is one" means only that we can point some specific and concrete connections (*e.g.* the heat-conduction or the postal system) between one part and another of the universe, so that this proposition is true just so far as we can point and describe those various types of union. James never says that you can choose to believe what you want in this matter according to your taste or temperament. In the same fashion, the meaning of the concept of "material substance" does not vary from one person to the other: you can like or dislike cherries, but your individual taste has nothing to do with the way Berkeley or James makes the idea of a cherry clear, by reducing it to specific and concrete elements (the sensations of color, figure, hardness and the like, as opposed to the indescribable substance). That is why James is a verificationist (a liberal one, like Wright, Peirce and Dewey): describing in each case the specific and concrete process of verification is the only way to make clear the general and abstract relation of correspondence that makes a belief true. This has nothing to do with individuals in their variable subjectivity. When I believe that there are tigers in India, I do not choose to do so because I love those majestic animals, so that if you happen to believe the contrary, I would try to convince you by showing you how wonderfully happy you would be if you were to believe like me. James very clearly says that the proposition "there are tigers in India" is true if you (or me or anybody) can take a plane (or a boat), go to India, and see some tigers. Or you can phone the guardian of an Indian national park, if you have good reason to believe him. There is a satisfaction to be proved right, but this satisfaction is only the satisfaction to have arrived where one planned to be, and it is "insufficient unless reality be also incidentally led to. If the reality assumed were canceled from the pragmatist's universe of discourse, he would straightway give the name of falsehoods to the beliefs remaining, in spite of their satisfactoriness" (James, 1975b: 106). It is quite astonishing to see Cheryl Misak stresses so forcefully the role of experience that constrains the truth and falsity of our beliefs or propositions in Peirce's or Lewis's epistemologies and fail to remind us that experience is certainly the keyword of James's and Dewey's philosophies which they take in conformity with Locke's concept, as meaning something (like the taste of the pineapple) that we cannot suppress when we have it and something that we cannot create from the sole resources of our mind when we do not have it (try to produce the taste of the pineapple on your tongue without eating one: that is the "surprise" of experience Peirce talked about). As James said: "between the whole body of funded truths squeezed from the past and the coercions of the world of sense about him, who so well as he [the pragmatist] feels the immense pressure of objective control under which our minds perform their

operations?" (James, 1975a: 111-112). Cheryl Misak notes sometimes that there are two sides in James's thought – let us name them Dr. Scientific Psychologist, who talks about objective verification in experience, and Mr. Believe, who talks about subjective satisfaction. But these are the two sides of the same coin: classical pragmatism is both an empiricism and a naturalism as she claims herself. "Verification" is part of the empiricist vocabulary while "satisfaction" (or "utility") is part of the naturalist one. According to James, it amounts to the same thing to say that the intellectual instruments we device put us in a satisfying relation to our environment *when the environment select them* and that the beliefs or theories we frame are verified *when they pass the trial of experience*. Let us just say that her chapter on James (or on Dewey) is not indefeasible.

7 4. I would like to add a last methodological remark regarding the classification. It is misleading to say that Cheryl Misak proposes to distinguish between two branches or two kinds of pragmatism, as all there really is according to her presentation is a unique ladder with Peirce at the top and Rorty at the bottom. Her work provides us with no real comparative contrast, but rather with what we could call a biased contrast, where the presence of a positive element is contrasted only with the absence of the element in question and not with another positive element ("One kind tries to retain a place for objectivity and for our aspiration to get things right while the other is not nearly so committed to that," 2013: 246). Comparative anthropologist taught us that we should not talk about the contrast between modern occidental societies and the other as being between rational and irrational societies, as if these other societies could only be defined by the absence of our rationality (this is a case of ethnocentrism). I believe her book suffered from "peircocentrism," in so far as the recurrent reproach addressed to people like James, Dewey, Schiller or Rorty is that they are not peircian enough (while others are good in so far as they rediscovered Peirce's conceptions). It is a very legitimate enterprise to try to classify the pragmatists, but we should aim at finding a real comparative contrast. I would suggest that if James, Schiller, Dewey (and Rorty) could be gathered in the same class, it is because they think that the most important thing human beings can do is to try to get things better. Meliorism is at the center of their vision, hence the idea of a plastic universe where real changes can be done, of the human mind as a set of instruments made to improve our capacity of changing our environment, of the experimental method as being the best way to control the changes, of the democracy as being the best way to make everyone participate in changes that concerns everyone. To get things right is of tremendous importance for them as it is the surest way to get things better. In short, we would have those who think that we have to hope for the truth (the hope to get things right) and those who think that truth is for the hope (the hope to get things better). For the latter, transformative kind of pragmatism, knowledge is for the sake of action (that is for the sake of the improvement of our situation). Action does not play a huge role in Cheryl Misak's book on pragmatism. It is as if the only action worth mentioning were the practice of talking and asserting – so much so that pragmatism's naturalism would only consist in extracting the norms of truth from those linguistic practices, which seem a very thin naturalism compared to the thick biological naturalism present in James's, Dewey's or Mead's view of man as an acting intelligent organism in a natural and social environment. The primacy of practice means for them to look at every problem, the nature of truth included, from the point of view of an agent who has *something to do* concerning this problem, not from the point of view of a spectator that can stand outside what James called "the arena of life."

*

8 Notwithstanding these few remarks, I am in complete agreement with her program to determine what pragmatism should be, namely a way of being anti-foundationalist without being relativist. But I would firstly do more credit to Rorty as the first one who redescribed pragmatism as an antifoundationalism, a category that he articulated and which he successfully used to cast a new light on the old pragmatists as well as on the story of analytical philosophy. And secondly I would not choose this position to divide the American pragmatists, as it is a common thread that may be shown to link old, new and neo-pragmatists together – James and Dewey are part of this family, and even Rorty when he took as his philosophical agenda to reconcile his criticism of the notion of truth with his hope for progress – that he may not have succeeded does not change the fact that such was his line. But even if it is so, there may still be room, as Cheryl Misak wisely notices, for "interfamilial issues" (2013: 251).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

JAMES W., (1975-1988), *The Complete Works of William James*, 19 vols., Burkhardt Frederick H. ed., Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

JAMES W., (1975a), Vol. 1: *Pragmatism*

JAMES W., (1975b), Vol. 2: *The Meaning of Truth*

JAMES W., (1979), Vol. 6: *The Will to Believe*

MISAK C., (2013), *The American Pragmatists*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

MISAK C. ed., (2010), *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

NOTES

1. Cheryl Misak, *The American Pragmatists*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013. When not otherwise noticed, all references in the text will be to this work.

2. Concerning the religious dilemma, I would defend the idea that the will to believe-method allows us to make the atheist option prevail. Firstly, we should consider that what James calls "God" has evaporated to the estate of a vague and finite moral force, since every theological dogma such as creationism that contradicts some established scientific theories does not constitute a real option in the dilemma and can safely be eliminated on intellectual grounds only. Secondly, the application of the method leads James to acknowledge that the practical consequences of theism are the same as those of indeterminism, both being "general cosmological theory of *promise*," so that we do not lose anything important by not believing in God, provided that we do believe in freedom. Finally, James' belief in an eternal moral order that God incarnates entails the curiously anti-pragmatic idea of a "higher guarantee" that secures the

issue of the flux of our experiences. This idea threatens the core belief of indeterminacy, so that we would be more faithful to pragmatism if we believe in contingency and just drop the whole question of god.

AUTHOR

STÉPHANE MADELRIEUX

University of Jean Moulin – Lyon 3
maderie[at]hotmail.com